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# THE DECLINE AND FALL OF WAGNER.

BY REGINALD DE KOVEN.

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PROGRESS and development; these are the watchwords of Art!

Progress, in its resistless march along the road of the inexorable law of the survival of the fittest, looms up dominant and overpowering; a very iconoclast to overthrow movements, shatter ideals, destroy theories, overturn idols from their pedestals, to rob many a laureate of his wreath, and snatch the mantle of fame from many a hero. And all this the world must face and endure as best it may; for without progress and development Art would lose vitality, that power of expansion and recrudescence which is the cardinal essential of its being.

To avoid a misapprehension which might deem the statement made in the caption of this article subversive, incendiary and even impertinent, a very *lèse-majesté*, as it were, to a monarch of Art, its intent and purpose should be defined and made clear *ab initio*. To Wagner the tone poet, Wagner the maker of a new musical epoch, Wagner the emotional philosopher who, like a Napoleon, has changed the map of the musical world and impressed his commanding genius and individuality on his art in ineradicable fashion that will endure as long as the Art itself, I do not refer. It is with Wagner the stage craftsman, Wagner the dramatist, Wagner the high priest and prophet of a new order of things operatic, the inventor of a new Art form, and the certain decline and probable fall of his works in popular estimation from this standpoint, that this article has to do.

And, first, as to the fact; and the indications pointing to a probable, or even possible, decline and fall of the works of a Master who, for years and until recently, has absorbed and held the practically undivided attention of the musical world.

During the season now drawing to a close, a condition of affairs operatic wholly without precedent in musical annals has

obtained in New York, in the simultaneous and successful financial existence and continuance of two Opera Houses, each giving performances of Grand and Lyric Opera of the highest artistic order of excellence, by an *ensemble* of artists which has included, first and last, the name of practically every great star now set in the operatic firmament.

Such conditions have never existed previously in any capital of the world; for, in cities like Vienna and Munich, where Grand Opera is given in more than one Opera House, there is no competition between rival managements; a single company being drawn on to supply their various operatic needs. In Paris the Opéra and the Opéra Comique, though trenching more than formerly on each other's peculiar domain through the present dedication of the latter house principally to Lyric Operas, like "Louise," are separate and distinct, both equally under Government patronage, and conducted without thought of interference, competition or rivalry, the one with the other.

These conditions, and the present likelihood of their permanence, make New York to-day the principal operatic centre of the world, and the cultivation and cosmopolitan character of its music-loving population insure a catholicity of taste in its audiences, the expression of which makes a sufficiently broad basis on which to rest an opinion and judgment justly applicable to Opera the world over.

Taking, therefore, New York as a reasonable criterion of operatic taste, and without delving into numerical statistics of the performances of his works abroad, the fact may be stated as incontrovertible that the decline and fall of Wagner, as a writer of musico-dramatic works and operas, in popular interest and appreciation is to-day marked and definite. New York has never known a season when fewer of Wagner's works have been performed; when performances of these works have aroused so little popular interest, or enlisted so scant a measure of popular support. At the newer Opera House no single performance of any one of the Wagner operas has been given, and a query to the manager as to the reason of this state of affairs elicited the reply: "Why should I give them? The public don't want them!" At the older house, where Wagner and all his works reigned supreme only a few years ago, to the practical exclusion of the standard repertory, Puccini is paramount, and

Verdi, whom ardent Wagnerites had consigned to a deserved and unconsidered oblivion, is triumphantly *redivivus*. A performance of one of the dramas of the "Ring," like "Die Walküre" or "Siegfried," which formerly would attract an eager, enthusiastic throng almost reverential in interest and attention, is now greeted with a careless apathy amounting to indifference and half a house, the popular-priced seats being noticeably empty; while "Trovatore" with Caruso, which means a vocal performance, packs the house from pit to dome. The more formal operas, like "Tannhäuser," "The Flying Dutchman" and the once supremely popular "Lohengrin," meet with a like fate; so that it would seem that Wagner altogether, and not merely Wagner as an operatic theorist in a special field of his own discovery—the Music-Drama—is on the decline.

It may be urged to account for this that the work of artists, like the de Reszkes and others, who proved that Wagner was not unvocal and could be artistically sung, has spoiled our audiences for performances of less artistic merit; that the present presentations of the Wagner works do not equal those of former years in point of general excellence, completeness and the true Wagnerian spirit and tradition; but the position thus taken is not, to my thinking, a tenable one, or the contention thus raised a just one. The performances of these operas this year have been given by the best and most reputed singers obtainable anywhere, and, whatever their shortcomings, are at least as good as could be seen anywhere else in the world at the present time.

No; while the fact under discussion is undeniable, the reasons for existing conditions lie deeper, and must be found elsewhere. In three directions, as I hold, may good and sufficient reasons to account satisfactorily for the waning interest in and appreciation of Wagnerian opera and music-drama be looked for: in the inherent character of the works themselves; behind the curtain among the singers; and in front of it among the audience. And as it is the audience that constitutes the final court of artistic appeal—the audience in whose hands lie the ultimate fate and destiny of all works written either to entertain or instruct them, for which appeal is made to their favor; the audience, whose judgment, after all, formulates the opinion of posterity—it may be interesting first to note what conclusions regarding the subject under discussion may be drawn from their

tastes and sympathies, as evidenced by their attitude toward the works in question.

In the degrees and shades of their individual appreciation the adherents and admirers of Wagner might a short time since have been divided into four classes: the Exclusive, the Rational, the Intuitive and the Partial.

To the first, now practically done away with, belong the fanatic, frenetic Wagnerites, who in an extravagant admiration amounting almost to impertinence, worship the master of Baireuth as the only composer who ever lived or could live—thus robbing the art of music both of its past and of its future,—and who, in denying the works of all other composers, past and present, as unworthy of attention or consideration, only admit their own ignorance and lack of artistic intelligence and understanding. The disappearance of this formerly large class was inevitable, and has certainly tended to diminish the size of Wagnerian audiences.

To the “Rational” admirers of the second class belong the educated and cultured musicians, who, realizing that Wagner has crowned the progressive development of music as an art with the glorious crown of his wonderful genius, admire sanely and justly because they understand what there is to admire. This class still remains; but as the art moves ever forward in progress and development, the allegiance of even this class can no longer continue so exclusive, as their interest and admiration are constantly drawn away in other directions toward newer fields of progressive effort.

The “Intuitive,” who might also be called the temperamental, admirer of the third class, depends for his enjoyment on mere feeling and sensation, rather than on any musical knowledge or training. The varied and rich color, the dynamic contrast, the impact force of the orchestra in its appeal to the sensory nerves, attracts his attention and stimulates his emotions. Though ignorant musically, he is moved, he knows not why, and so admires; and his admiration continues so long as his senses are affected and these temperamental and emotional sensations are renewed. But the music of more modern composers who have out-Wagnered Wagner, who with added din and tumult of orchestral thunder hurl masses of strenuous sound down the spines of their listeners and thus outvie and go beyond in sensuous in-

tensity and power the temperamental influences which Wagner understood so well how to create, has weaned away many admirers of this class in giving them newer, bolder and more vivid musical sensations. Thus again has a part of the audience which Wagner once controlled and swayed exclusively, been lessened and diminished.

To the last class, perhaps the largest,—now that time has lessened the overwhelming dominance of the personal and contemporaneous influence of a mighty genius, has penetrated the mists of prejudice and extravagance for and against, and so brought about the possibility of calmer, saner and more considered critical judgment,—belongs the “Partial” admirer. The former doctrine that Wagner could do no wrong he disallows; he admires with reservations, admits the possibility of intelligent criticism, and, without being thought a Philistine and outside the pale, can express an opinion, now shared by an ever-increasing number, that the Wagner operatic works are almost invariably too long, are often dull, seldom vocally agreeable after the manner of other schools, and might generally be cut to advantage.

One may thus readily discover, in the attitude towards his works of each and of every class of Wagner admirers, a reason for the decline and fall in the popular interest and appreciation in and of those works, which is the subject of this article.

If we turn to the behind-the-scenes country, the world back of the curtain peopled by the artists and singers whose mission it is to realize and interpret the works of this great master, we find without difficulty a variety of new reasons and conditions, different indeed, but even more cogent and weighty in effect, bearing and influence on the question before us.

It is now generally admitted that Wagner wrote inconsiderately, if not unskilfully, for voices, using them like orchestral instruments without proper regard for their physical possibilities and limitations. In spite of this, and on the other hand, it has been successfully demonstrated by many great artists, and notably by M. Jean de Reszke (whose rendering of the rôles of Lohengrin, Tristan and Walther in “*Die Meistersinger*,” in showing us how effective they were vocally if properly sung, has spoiled us for all other interpretations), that Wagner’s music could be artistically sung without violating the true Wagnerian spirit

and tradition. But at what cost? Where are the great Wagnerian singers to-day? The former ones used up, retired before their time by the effort to endue with vocal art irresponsible vocal conditions which admitted of it but hardly. The present ones, of inferior excellence generally speaking, struggle as best they may with the same well-nigh impossible vocal conditions, or, as is now often the case, refuse these conditions altogether and decline to sing Wagner's music at all.

And this same Wagner tradition has had much to do with bringing about these conditions which make the decline of Wagner as an operatic writer a certainty; his fall and relative desuetude merely a question of time. The ardent Wagnerite was wont to say: "Wagner need not be sung; indeed, should not be sung"! A marvellous dictum, truly, when the experience which Wagner has helped largely to make has shown that the human voice, properly used, as the most potent means of emotional effect known to musical art, cannot be disregarded or made secondary in any scheme or system broadly speaking operatic, involving any possible union of text and music, if that scheme or system is to remain vital or endure.

A few years ago I unearthed in a German newspaper, enthusiastically Wagnerian in sympathy, the following precious commentary on an authoritative enunciation of the Wagnerian vocal theory and tradition. If voices or vocal art have anything to do with opera or music-drama at all, the complete reasons for the decline and fall of Wagner lie imbedded in this remarkable utterance, this astounding pronunciamento of a well-known exponent of so-called Wagnerian theories:

"If I were to call a *Dienstmann* from the street, and placing before him a Wagner score, and allowing he could sing it at sight, the way that he would sing that music naturally and without previous training would be the way Wagner's music should be sung."

Small wonder, then, if singers, as now, are beginning to refuse to imperil natural vocal gifts or waste years of vocal training in singing music that "need not be sung." Where, then, as the present generation of singers is fast disappearing, are the future singers of Wagner music to come from or be found? If, as seems to be the case, Wagner's music, whether well sung, or shouted in *Dienstmann* fashion, is too exacting in its demands on the human voice to allow of voices successfully complying with those de-

mands for any length of time without permanent injury or complete disability, it is also evident that with the singers themselves lie perhaps the principal reasons for the inevitable decline and fall of Wagner for purposes operatic. If, again, the practicability of singing this music artistically be admitted, it is so much more difficult to sing effectively than music written with more regard for the possibilities of the human voice, that singers turn with natural preference to such music, and audiences, having once more become accustomed to the delights of *Bel Canto* from such artists as Tetrizzini and Sembrich, Caruso, Bonci, Renaud and their peers, find that even the best Wagnerian singers suffer by comparison and lose in both interest and charm, as well as in their capacity to provide artistic pleasure and enjoyment. And this is a reason in point which accounts for so much in the wane of the Wagner music-drama that it may not be lightly set aside or underestimated.

It may, therefore, I think, be admitted as having been shown conclusively that, in the attitude of the singers as well as in that of audiences regarding it, ample reasons may be found to justify the contention made, that there is a decided and rapidly growing change in the feelings of both musicians and the public at large toward Wagner's music in connection with the operatic stage.

If we turn our attention, sanely and without prejudice, to the inherent character of Wagner's art and his theories of it as exemplified in his operas and music-dramas, we shall again and without difficulty find satisfactory and convincing reasons for the decline of that art in popular estimation.

It has been said that the longevity of a work of art is in direct ratio to the nobility of its conception, and its humanity or truth to human nature. In like manner, it may be said that the proof of the truth of any theory lies in the universality of its possible application. To question the nobility of conception inherent in all of Wagner's works would be idle; but their humanity, and the universality of application of the theories which governed their construction, in view of present indications affecting their enduring qualities, may well be doubted.

Wagner held that legendary and mythological lore was the only source from which subjects proper for musico-dramatic



treatment could be drawn, and it is largely the character of the subjects of his music-dramas which seems to-day to militate against them with the public. Life now is very real, very intense; day by day the world goes further away from the romantic and nearer the practical. The problem-play has ousted the play of romance; the drama of action has taken the place of the drama of emotion. Events move too rapidly, life in its kaleidoscopic change and variety is too vivid, too restless in nervous per-fervid energy, to allow of our sitting contentedly through long hours in contemplation of the actions of giants, dwarfs and dragons, of the doings of mythical heroes and demigods and their impossible sexual relations, which touch real human nature at no point. It is this lack of humanity in the Wagner operas and music-dramas which transgresses the axiomatic canon governing the longevity of a work of art, and in so far is a fruitful cause of their present decadence.

Other causes lie in their inordinate and anything but divine length, for Wagner, intense egoist that he was, never thought he could say too much; in their depressing lack of movement and action through long and arid wastes of dreary monologue and dull soliloquy; and in the lack of opportunity for effective vocal display, and the heart-breaking demands on vocal endurance alluded to above. All reasons enough and to spare, one would think, to fully account for and explain existing conditions which may hardly be denied. In the rush and turmoil of present-day existence people like their emotions short, sharp and to the point;—hence the vogue of Puccini and the modern Italians,—and go more and more to the theatre and opera for mental relaxation and amusement. However interesting, artistic and moving the Wagner music-dramas may be, the wildest stretch of imagination could hardly call them amusing; while to properly appreciate the wonderful beauty which cannot be denied them is more often a severe mental strain than a relaxation.

Wagner himself is responsible for the statement that Love was the subject of all his dramas from the “Dutchman” to “Parsifal,” and it is in the character and treatment of their love-stories, as it seems to me, that these dramas are lacking in that real humanity and human interest which must be inherent in any work of art to insure its lasting vitality. The passion, the love, which is the supreme law of nature, of “Tristan and Isolde”

is too tense, too physical, to fail in its universal, sensuous appeal. But apart from their mythological character, which makes them inhuman rather than human, the love-stories of the "Ring" dramas, in their wanton defiance of natural law in love, are repellent rather than attractive; and which one among the Wagner heroines, Senta, Elsa, Elisabeth or Eva, really enlists our sympathies or holds our interest? The mystic atmosphere of legendary lore which through each one moves seems to rob their characters of that intangible something which touches the answering chord of understanding and sympathy in our hearts. They do not seem of our world, these poetically imaginative heroines, but look out at us as through a veil of unreality; shadowy, remote, apart.

How far the character of the absolute musical structure of these dramas may affect their permanence is still a debatable question. The idea of Wagner's lack of melody has been so completely exploded as to be unworthy of discussion. But for all their melodiousness it may well be that the lack of more formal, salient, fluent melody, of melody which sings itself naturally like that of Mozart, in these dramas, has had not a little to do with their present decline in popular favor. And yet how simple, and even obviously melodic, passages formerly thought discordant and recondite now sound! Wagner's theory of the "*Leit-motif*" or illustrative theme, and his magnificent development of the orchestra as a factor in the general scheme of construction and effect, seem so firmly engrafted on modern musical thought and methods, and their influence is everywhere so apparent, that they strike one as the elements in these dramas most likely to obtain permanently. It must be borne in mind, however, that the Wagnerian music-dramas have, so far, been without successors; that no musico-dramatic work of real importance and significance—unless it be Strauss's "*Salome*"—in strict exemplification of the Wagnerian theories has yet been written, so that it would be dangerous and misleading to accept the success of special instances of transcendent genius as indicating the permanent artistic value or universal applicability of the means whereby this success has been achieved.

The Wagnerian theories have not yet been proved to be practical working theories susceptible of general application to musico-dramatic art, and it is their continued empirical charac-

ter which is responsible for the unrest which pervades the musical world to-day, and has beyond question much to do with their present decadence and may account for their ultimate downfall.

The influence, on the art of music as a whole, of the existing uncertainty as to the eventual fate of the Wagner music-dramas, is another question, and quite outside the intent and scope of this article, but one which need cause no disquietude. Beethoven built on the foundations laid by Bach; on the structure thus created Wagner reared his mighty superstructure. Music, the youngest of the arts, is still young, instinct with vitality and susceptible of continued further progress, as recent modern development conclusively proves. Who, then, shall say that another epoch-making genius will not arise to crown the edifice in the upbuilding of which Wagner, with Bach and Beethoven, played his mighty and significant rôle?

In view of obvious existing conditions, the fact suggested by this article can hardly be intelligently doubted; the reasons adduced to adequately account for it seem both good and sufficient; and if within so short a time the whilom "Music of the Future," as may hardly be gainsaid, has become the Music of the Present, is it unreasonable to predict that with corresponding rapidity—for the world moves fast these days—it may in its turn become the Music of the Past?

REGINALD DE KOVEN.